THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

No Greater Love Than This

John M. Buchanan

May 28, 2000

Through the history of the West since the time of Jesus there has remained just enough of the substance of the original Gospel, a residuum, for it to be passed, as it were, from hand to hand and to be used, like stock, to strengthen, flavor and invigorate new movements that have succeeded again and again—if only for a time—in producing *alteri Christi*, men and women in danger of crucifixion. It has also produced, repeatedly and in the oddest circumstances, the loving-kindness of the first Christians.

Thomas Cahill
Desire of the Everlasting Hills, The World Before and After Jesus

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago
126 East Chestnut Street, Chicago, IL 60611-2094
(312) 787-4570

NO GREATER LOVE

MAY 28, 2000
JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

1 John 4:21-5:5
John 15:9-17
"No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life to one's friends." (John 15:13)

Startle us, O God, with the memory of your love working creatively down across the years of our lives. Startle us with your truth, working in our intellects, and startle us with your lively, loving presence in our lives this day, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

There was a special Memorial Day edition of *Time* magazine last week, "*Last Letters Home: Correspondence from Soldiers Who Never Made it Back*" with an essay by Tom Brokaw and a very thoughtful piece by Roger Rosenblatt on how we remember and the function of remembering the tragic events of the past.

Rosenblatt described the striking Oklahoma City Memorial which honors the 168 men, women and children who died five years ago in the bombing of the Alfred B. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. There is a bronze chair for each of the victims, each one with a name on it. Rosenblatt describes how thousands of people visit and become quiet: some look for a particular chair; others stroll reflectively through the rows. Rosenblatt asks, "What uses does one make of the past when it comes to the exercise of evil? How confident can one be when saying 'never again?' Is it ever possible to relieve the terrible gaping absence that death creates?" Rosenblatt argues that from Viet Nam to Oklahoma City, America's new memorials help us come to terms with the tragic past.

The letters from soldiers who never made it back, were heartbreaking: a cheerful, breezy letter from Robert Mitchell, a Columbia law student, to his friend Winifred, October 6, 1918, from somewhere in France a week before he died; from Ross McCollum, November 1944, who was shot down over the North Atlantic, to his brother Bud; from Jack Emery to Audrey to whom he had just proposed, July 6, 1944, sending all his love and his hopes that she had received the ring and proposal letter. And, closer to all of us, from Dean Allen killed in Vietnam, July 10, 1969, to his new wife.

The text for this Sunday, May 28th, Fifth Sunday after Easter, is from the 15th chapter of the Gospel according to John: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for a friend."(John 15:13) That text, and the fact that it is Memorial Day weekend, and those letters, set me to wondering about how it was here, at Fourth Presbyterian Church during those days. And so I asked our archivist, Bob Rasmussen, who is an expert in Fourth Church history and lore and Bob produced a big box from the archives the contents of which occupied most of my Wednesday afternoon.

The first items were pamphlets dated July, August 1918, and listed the names of Fourth Church members and Men's Club members in uniform, 280 in August that year. One of them was Chaplain Harrison Ray Anderson, 512th Engineers, with the American Expetionary Force in

France. Anderson was an Assistant Pastor here before he enlisted and he came home after the war to become Pastor.

The next item in the box was a letter Anderson wrote to Fourth Church service people, July 16, 1942. On that early date in the war there were already 104 church members in the service. Before it was over there would be 450.

Anderson wrote warmly and pastorally, to tell them that two of their number had died, that their church missed them, that their absence was felt each Sunday. The news at that time—1942—was not good. Anderson described how in similar circumstances 30 years earlier in France he was part of a similar difficult predicament, and he encouraged his young members to be strong and courageous and he even threw in a fatherly admonition to keep themselves clean and to "be in church when you can." He also carefully explained that there was a Fourth Church Honor Roll, a book with a page for each of them and he asked them for a snap shot and news of their assignment, location and rank. And he explained that the books were kept on the Communion table, that the names were read and the congregation at worship prayed for each of them personally.

We have placed the books on the Communion table this morning. They are part of this church's treasures. They will be on a table in Anderson Hall for your inspection between services.

Mildred Benesch, Women's Army Corp, 1943-45 is in there—along with Ida Bensen and Nancy Bastein.

Harrison Ray Anderson, Jr. is in there in his Navy uniform with his brother, John Anderson, a Navy pilot, taken by the Garth fountain before they shipped out. Marine Sargeant Norman Swenson has a page. He returned and to work for Fourth Church as a building supervisor and business manager and Marina, his wife, still teaches in our church school.

In the front of the first book there is a newspaper article describing how the idea for the Honor Roll books came from the Scottish War Memorial at Edinburgh Castle where the name of every Scot, fallen in battle is inscribed in an open book, arranged by geography and military unit. I have visited there and checked on my own Scottish forbearers.

There was a Fourth Church committee of course, the Military Service Committee whose assignment it was to make monthly contact with every Fourth Church service person and their families, and the records and careful minutes indicate that they performed their assignment faithfully.

The Honor Roll also contains a special page for the names of the 15 church members who did not return.

John Drummond, killed in the Philippines on December 31, 1941—just three weeks after it started, Lewis Edmon, whose submarine was lost in the Pacific, John Timothy Stones Evans, John Timothy Stone's grandson; Stone was Harrison Ray Anderson's predecessor, Pastor here when the building was built; and Ford Echelman, whose plane was shot down off the coast of Okinawa on May 27, 1945, 55 years ago yesterday.

"There is no greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" is inscribed at the top of that page.

There is something about us that wants and needs to remember. And there is something about remembering that has at least the potential of being redemptive and healing and restorative.

I used to wonder on Memorial Day about the people who gathered around the stone monument in our neighborhood for a brief ceremony. What were they there for? After the War communities all over the country erected monuments and dedicated them to the men and women who lost their lives in the conflict. Not only in our country. It seems that every English and Scottish village has a monument in the town square memorializing the dead of World War I and World War II which was a lot closer and more immediate and more threatening there than here. Our monuments, the monument I remember, was not particularly heroic, not a celebration of conquest and victory, but rather plain, a small pyramid with a bronze plaque on which were engraved the names of those who died – I knew some of them – Pennington, Kibler, Sipes, knew the families. A minister would offer a prayer. An American Legion official would say a few words about duty and heroism and sacrifice. And the best part—the local Army Reserve would dispatch several men to fire rifles in a military salute, which we watched in fascination, then scrambled to recover the spent shell casings, which seemed like treasures at the time. And then a local trumpeter would play taps. My Mother and Father would go to these simple rituals. In one terrible 7 day period in 1944, Dad's oldest brother Frank was killed in France, and his two sons were lost, Dick killed in the South Pacific and Frank, Jr., missing in action over Italy. He, Frank Buchanan, Jr., bailed out, was captured, escaped and returned a war hero, and a hero to me until he died a few years ago. Mother's youngest brother, a Marine, John Calvin McCormick, for whom I am named, died on Saipan. So they joined the handful who gathered at the monument, took me along, and she would shed a tear during the sounding of taps and he would let me free to scramble after the shell casings. What were they doing there? What was that about? I know now: remembering can be healing and restorative and redemptive.

A visit to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington was, for me a powerful experience. I know names on that black wall, that stark entrenchment in the ground of the capital. Not far away, a squad of bronze infantrymen on patrol remind us of a mostly forgotten but costly war in Korea which people my age missed by just two or three years.

The *Time* magazine article I referred to earlier described how the nation remembers some of its most painful experiences: Gettysburg, Iwo Jima, Oklahoma City, and Columbine High School. Professor Ed Linenthal of the University of Wisconsin observes about memorials and monuments "the memory of the event will be as transforming as the event itself and as humanizing as the event was dehumanizing." Professor Linenthal calls them "places of civic transformation ... one comes away changed." [*Time*, 5/29/00]

That's what they were doing there. Seeking transformation, looking for something human in the midst of the pain they had experienced.

"No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

Jesus said that to his disciples on the very night he was betrayed and arrested, the night before his crucifixion. They were at the table of the Last Supper and as he sensed the crisis, the closeness of danger, the possibility of the end, it was time for summing up. The Biblical scholars call the material in the 13th through the 17th chapters of John, the Farewell Discourses. Jesus has been talking about the centrality of love. It's a new way of thinking about God and religion and faith

actually. God is love, John will write elsewhere. Not God is power. Not God is a judge, not God is omnipotent, but God is love. It is the very essence of God to act lovingly. And furthermore those who abide in love abide in God. Those who express God's love in their own lives, actually live as close to God as it is possible to live. They abide in God because they abide in love.

"If you love me you will keep my commandments" he has told them. "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another just as I have loved you."

Now it becomes even more intense – "I am the vine. You are the branches. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Abide in my love." And then the most radical, most profound definition of love: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

He left that upper room that night and did just that, did the unthinkable, died for them, laid down his life for his friends, died for us.

Thomas Cahill, in his new book, *Desire of the Everlasting Hills, The Time Before and After Jesus*, observes that one of the insights of the great Jewish prophets was that suffering has redemptive possibilities. In a way none of us can understand God, who does not will not cause suffering, shares it with us and can somehow use it for purposes that are ultimately good. He quotes Martin Luther King who said, not long before his own assassination, "I have come to believe that unmerited suffering is redemptive." [p. 296] Not, please hear, that suffering is God's will, but that somehow God can use suffering for purposes that exceed our ability to understand. What else, after all, can we say about this one who goes obediently to his cross, than that his suffering is for our salvation, that with his stripes we are healed, that he laid down his life for his friends and that somehow God uses that to make us more human, to make us more loving, to heal us and redeem us and make us whole, to save our souls?

That's what happens when we remember: somehow the ugly horror of the holocaust, when we confront it, and see it and remember, when we look at that striking dramatic pile of shoes, when we walk through the children's memorial at Yad Veshem in Jerusalem and see the tiny twinkling candles against darkly mirrored walls, each for a child killed – somehow the remembering of the horror not only stimulates outrage and anger and resolve, but also gratitude for the gift of life and somehow incredibly - the mystery of God's love. So that Elie Wiesel, Auschwitz survivor who reflects so profoundly on the whole experience, will write finally – not his moral outrage and anger and despair, but about love: "The name of man's secret is God, and the name of God's secret is none other than the one invented by man: love. Who loves – loves God.... In (our) universe, everything is connected because nothing is without meaning." [*Souls on Fire*, 1972]

"No one has greater love than this." Distinguished New Testament Scholar Raymond Brown said that the deeper you go into this text, the more the words love and life become interchangeable. "One of the great distinguishing characteristics of Christianity "is here," Brown said, "in the example of giving life away." [*The Gospel of John*, Vol. 2, p 682]

What he wanted desperately for them to hear was the word he had come to believe was the reason for his own being: that the whole creation is full of God's love, that the human race is the expression of God's love, that all the religious ritual and rules and liturgies and institutions in the world are for the purpose of acknowledging and expressing gratitude for God's love and that the highest, most noble purpose of religion and our humanity is to be recreated by that love and to join God in the adventure of living that love, abiding in that love.

If you want to save your life, you have to, in some way lose your life. If you want to be happy, you have to forget about your happiness and work for someone else's. If you want meaning and satisfaction and fulfillment you have to find a way to pour out your life.

It is the Christian secret. It is what he meant when he told them – "you are my friends .... No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

I found a new hero recently. He's a man who has sustained the most serious tragedy I can imagine, but who has decided that he will live in a way that transforms the tragedy into hope, and in the process he has been transformed. His name is Tom Mauser and his son Daniel was one of the youngsters killed at Columbine High School. Tom Mauser was given the Citizen's Advocacy Award by the Illinois Council Against Handgun Violence at a luncheon last week. He told, with a steady, determined voice, how a few nights before the shooting his son Daniel, at the dinner table had said, for no apparent reason, "Dad do you know there are loopholes in the Brady bill?" Mauser told about waiting at a school gym with parents of the students who were evacuated from the High School and brought in groups to their waiting parents, how the group of parents got smaller and smaller until the terrible realization that the last bus had arrived and his son was not on it and he had lost him. He told how Daniel was shy and had joined the debate team to overcome his shyness: how he was small, skinny, but had joined the Cross Country team to compete in athletics and how in his unspeakable grief he, the father, had decided that he should "run in Daniel's place," carry on his life and make the world a safer place.

So he has taken a leave of absence from his job to work for a gun control advocacy effort in Colorado and speaks and lobbies and tells his story and endures death threats and the incredible meanness of the NRA and its spokesperson Wayne LaPierre and the pathetic silliness of it's President, Charleton Heston waiving a musket and saying "This is for you Vice President Gore."

Tom Mauser has decided that his son's death will not be forgotten, that his brief life will have meaning, and that he, his father, will transform that senseless death into an act of love with redemptive and healing potential.

It is important to remember. Memory, even painful memory, can be healing and restorative and transforming.

Jesus said:

> **"I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."**

He said:

> **"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."**

And he said:

> **"No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."**

Thanks be to God.
Amen.